Illiberals of the World Unite in Budapest - Yet Again

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On account of the American Conservative Political Action Coalition (CPAC) meeting in Budapest in May 19-20, 2022 Kim Lane Scheppele asked the readers of Verfassungsblog what the culture wars hide and called attention to the illiberal features of the Hungarian regime – a timely contribution as a new amendment to the Fundamental Law (its tenth) expanded the emergency powers of the Orbán government even further under the pretext of the war in Ukraine.

While – to quote its convenors – CPAC in Budapest may have been „the first occasion that this major American political franchise arrives on the Continent", this is not such an exceptional occasion for conservatives and illiberals to mingle in Budapest. As the culture wars edge towards severe restrictions on access to legal and safe abortion in Poland and the U.S. – illiberal alliances forged in Budapest are important for the study of the global expansion of authoritarian rule (Freedom House 2022).

From disruption to new alliances

That illiberal hybrid and authoritarian regimes are eager to build global alliances sounds counterintuitive at first. After all, their populist leaders regularly campaign against global cosmopolitan elites, or chide international organizations for endangering their national constitutional identity and – more recently – undermining their national security. PM Orbán for his part has been actively involved in recent weeks in undermining EU sanctions on Russia – in the name of protecting Hungary's national interests. According to PM Orbán, as a landlocked country, Hungary deservers special accommodation (and additional European compensation) to forego Russian oil. As PM Orbán desired, the issue of sanctions was removed from the agenda of the upcoming European Council meeting.

Despite their strong localist and nativist inclinations, traditionalism does not turn illiberal democrats and autocrats against international cooperation, and their political ambitions do not halt at disrupting the operation of supranational organizations. Rather, they use both ad hoc opportunities and a regularly recurring annual events for networking. What marks these occasions is the careful selection of trusted participants based on strong personal connections, along shared values across different religions and continents.

As a major one-off event, President Bolsonaro's inauguration in 2019 was attended by Mike Pompeo, and prime ministers Orbán and Netanyahu. Silas Malafaia, a powerful televangelist who married Bolsonaro (a Catholic) and his wife Michelle (an Evangelical) said that "For us there is a spiritual value in blessing Israel," and that "Evangelicals gave Bolsonaro victory". For his part, President Bolsonaro reciprocated the personal visit to PM Orbán in the spring of 2022 on the same trip when he also saw President Putin in Moscow in person.

An emerging a global illiberal network

The illiberal calendar is bustling with annual events for a global network of democratically elected leaders, political activists, public intellectuals, religious leaders and donors. Key themes include countering the persecution of Christians and defending traditional family values. This new multi-lateralism at work operates outside the familiar frames of the UN, the EU or other regional formats. Curiously, it uses the language of human rights in a new modality, to protect traditional values, to resist progressive and 'woke' forces, and to urge the return of human rights to their natural state.

In 2018 the Trump administration, with the leadership of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, launched a ministerial to advance religious freedom around the world. At the 2019 ministerial in Washington Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó used the occasion

to announce Hungary's commitment to address the persecution of Christians abroad. After a virtual year in 2020 (hosted by Poland) and gap year in 2021, for 2022 the annual ministerial will be hosted by the UK government in London, as an international ministerial conference.

Since 2019 fighting against the persecution of Christians has become a key element of PM Orbán's vision of building a European illiberal Christian democracy (a political program he announced at a memorial for Helmut Kohl). In 2019 PM Orbán personally called on Europe to stop ignoring the persecution of Christians at the Hungarian government's second annual conference devoted to the persecution of Christians. He referred to reports commissioned by the UK government and prepared by the US State Department to support this strong claim of victimization with hard data. For his part, in 2019 the UK foreign secretary described the persecution of Christians as reaching 'genocide' levels.

Fruitful discussions inspired the governments of Brazil, Egypt, Hungary, Indonesia, Uganda, and the United States to sponsor in the fall of 2020 the Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family, described by its promoters as an 'international document' created at a 'multinational convention'. In 2021 Hungary and Poland jointly lead the countries of the Intermarium Region to discuss the potential avenues of rethinking international human rights in terms set forth in the Geneva Consensus Declaration (GCD). The speakers included Valerie Huber, described as the architect of the GCD, former U.S. Special Representative for Global Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Angela Gandra, Brazil's Secretary for the Family at the Ministry of Family and Human Rights.

Whether newly invigorated Polish sponsorship of the old idea of Intermarium will replace the V4 – crumbling in the shadow of Russian aggression in Ukraine – is yet to be seen. What is less uncertain is that the speakers committed to promoting traditional family, social and human values find ample occasion to mingle and network with the political and civil service elite of illiberal hybrid regimes.

At the recent CPAC gathering in Budapest, Grégor Puppinck, the director of the European Center for Law and Justice praised "Hungary, a country that symbolizes resistance to the ‚woke' culture." In defense of the traditional family and traditional family values he submitted that "*The destruction of the fatherhood leads to the one of the fatherland*, because the family is the place where persons can be deeply rooted in one land, and in history." (original emphasis)

A few months before CPAC, in September 2021 Hungary hosted the fourth annual Budapest Democratic Summit of "pro-family thinkers, decision-makers to Budapest, Hungary, where we believe there is no future without strong families." Speakers included – in addition to PM Orbán — former US Vice-President Mike Pence, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, as well as the prime ministers of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. This year the emphasis was on the family as a key to sustainability with contributions from Marion Maréchal (Director-General, Institut des sciences sociales, économiques et politiques (ISSEP)) alongside numerous conservative public intellectuals from the US and Europe.

Just in weeks' time, on May 26-27, 2022 Budapest will be home to the 4th Transatlantic Summit of the Political Network for Values. According to its description, the summit will "address the intrinsic relationship between **freedom and human dignity in the face of contemporary challenges**. It's a call for political representatives, together with academics and civil society leaders, to contribute building the socio-political fabric for a free society" (emphasis in the original). Speakers include the who-is-who of previous similar events, with a very prominent line-up though leaders from US conservative organizations defending family values. They will be joined by equally prominent legal strategists and litigators from the Alliance Defending Freedom and the European Center for Law and Justice who have ample experience before national courts and the European Court of Human Rights in defending conscience claims that limit (what they see as) unnatural human rights.

That conservative legal mobilization and cause lawyering follows the well-tried recipes of the Civil Rights Movement in the European legal space is hardly news. CPAC in Budapest draws attention to the efforts of illiberal actors to build a global alliance that provides opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. The emerging outlines of the resulting political and legal mobilization signal the transformation of the language of human rights – from the universal language of freedom into a vocabulary of globalized traditionalism.

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